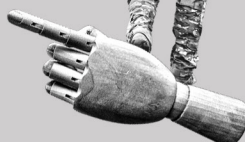
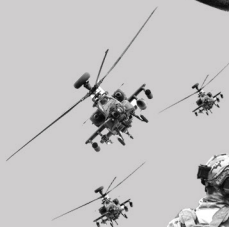
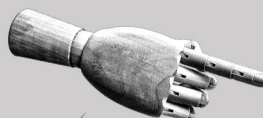


FALSE NEWS ON RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE IN THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE MEDIA



FALSE NEWS ON

RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

IN THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE MEDIA

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Working Definitions:

BIRN Albania has produced two reports into disinformation, false news and decontextualised photos and videos related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine during the period January – August 2022. This report sets out the impact of Russian state disinformation and its spread in Albanian-language media and social media, while the other report looks at how false news stories, based on deliberate falsehoods, and out-of-context images and videos, have been picked up and reported in Albanian-language media and social media. Below are listed some of the working definitions of the main terms used for the purpose of this specific report.

False news report: These refer to the fact-checking reports of the #UkraineFacts database which have debunked false news articles related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

False news articles: These are published media articles based on deliberately falsified facts.

False news narratives: These are the broader narratives, or themes, found across "false news" articles. For example false news articles on the human cost of war, circulation of conspiracy theories, false news on what led to the military escalation and efforts to dehumanising the enemy by valorising or denying the heroism of Ukrainian defenders.

False news republications: These are republications in the Albanian language media based on the original false news article.

Decontextualised photos and videos: These are genuine photos and videos which have been taken out of context. Sometimes that means they have been transposed from one war zone to another. In other cases the context has been warped to fit a certain narrative, for example a photo of Miss Ukraine in army fatigues was presented as evidence that she had joined the army to defend Ukraine, when, in fact, she had not become a soldier.

I. Context

On February 24, 2022, after weeks of warnings from the West and official denials from the Kremlin, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, setting the scene for a major escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 with the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and continued with a pro-Russian separatist war in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas. The invasion has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War Two. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, from February 24 to October 2, 2022, there were 15,246 civilian casualties in Ukraine: 6,114 killed and 9,132 injured.¹ The escalation of the conflict has caused millions of civilians to flee Ukraine and many more have been displaced inside the country. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, by October 25, 2022, more than 7.7 million Ukrainian refugees were recorded across Europe.²

An information war is also ongoing which has resulted in a wave of disinformation spread through media channels and social media platforms. This wave has taken many forms, including efforts to deny the victims of Russian military strikes on the civilian population as well as photos and videos taken out of their original context or from other conflicts and in some cases even simulations from video games. In a crisis situation like the invasion of Ukraine, disinformation travels quickly and far despite the best efforts of the media and fact-checking organisations to debunk hoaxes and propaganda. In order to map the spread of information manipulation and disinformation in Albania,

¹OHCHR, "Ukraine: civilian casualty update 3 October 2022", (2022), Url: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2022/10/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-3-october-2022>, Accessed on 26.10.2022.

²UNHCR, Ukrainian Refugee Situation, (2022), Url:<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>, Accessed on 26.10.2022.

through different platforms/channels of communication, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Albania researched the proliferation and reach of false news articles and **decontextualised photos and videos** on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Albanian language media outlets in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and the Albanian diaspora, as well as popular social media channels on Facebook and YouTube.

This research has found that, in contrast to what has been previously reported, false news on Ukraine has proliferated in the first eight-months of 2022 in Albanian language media outlets in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia. This false news output, which is mainly generated abroad and distributed on social media platforms, has been translated and republished by local media outlets. These comprise digital native media websites, television, radio and newspapers as well as their social media channels, mainly for commercial reasons. Based on the number of false news republications that have appeared in the Albanian language media, and in comparison with reported cases in other countries in the region and the world, the researchers have concluded that the spread of disinformation on the conflict has been higher than previously reported. Although distributed originally in different social media platforms, the researchers found that the majority of the false news on Russia's invasion of Ukraine were translated and republished in Albanian by mainstream media – being these digital native, television or print. Digital native media outlets, which often locally are called news portals, tend to have a higher number of false news republications in comparison with legacy media - television channels or print newspapers.

Albanian media have, in general, weak editorial structures and in start-up digital native media outlets editorial structures are next to nonexistent, thus explaining the high rate of false news narratives that are translated and republished.

II. Methodology

Until now there has been little published evidence on a concrete and sustained effort from a foreign power or government to meddle in Albania's politics and international affairs through disinformation or influence campaigns, based on the publication of false news articles and decontextualized videos or photos. However, when it comes to major international news events, like the social-media driven "(mis)information war" surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine³, false news does not need to target a country specifically to spread and morph narratives and perceptions. Albanian media outlets and local consumers of news and information are not immune to disinformation proliferating in the form of false news, doctored or out-of-context photos and videos, transmitted through online, broadcast and social media outlets on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

To research the proliferation of false news, photos and videos on the invasion in the local media, BIRN Albania made use of a database of false news articles called '#UkraineFacts'⁴, created by the Spanish fact-checking organisation 'Maldita.es', which includes information and contribution from more than 100 fact-checkers worldwide, signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)'s code. The IFCN is an international network of fact-checkers established in 2015 by the US-based Poynter Institute, with more than 100 organisations worldwide, which advocate for factual information and is attempting to turn the tide in the global fight against misinformation.⁵

The database '#UkraineFacts', collected a total of 2,425 fact-checking reports published in different

³ Verfassungsblog, "The War in Ukraine, Fake News, and the Digital Epistemic Divide", (2022),Url: <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-war-in-ukraine-fake-news-and-the-digital-epistemic-divide/>, Accessed on 26.10.2022.

⁴ Maldita.es, "#UkraineFacts database", (2022), Url: <https://ukrainefacts.org/>, Accessed on 31.10.2022.

⁵ Poynter Institute, "What is the International Fact-Checking Network?", (2021), Url: <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>, Accessed on 27.10.2022.

countries on 318 different false news or decontextualized video and photos published on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, starting from January 2022 until the end of August 2022. On average a single false news article was debunked eight times by different fact-checking organisations, often in different countries and languages, after going viral on social media. For each debunked false news article, keywords, search terms and phrases were identified, translated and open search techniques were used, to search for republications in the Albanian language media in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Although the main goal of the research was to identify and map the spread of false news, specifically in Albania, Albanian language media from the region, the diaspora or international outlets with Albanian language services also have readers in Albania and so data from these other outputs were also collected. The data collected from the research were entered in a spreadsheet in Excel and analysed through Pivot tables.

Although the list of false news narratives identified in the #Ukrainefacts database is not exhaustive and does not include all false news articles, posts or decontextualized photos and videos that have circulated on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine over the past year, it is the largest database of its kind identified by researchers. The database was selected also due to the fact that it looks at the spread of disinformation on the conflict on a global scale, making use of the contribution from dozens of fact-checking organisations, rather than focusing on a single country or region or a single fact-checking organisation with a wide geographical spread.

Disinformation campaigns are not new to the world of hybrid warfare; however, with the advent of technology platforms and their increased role in disseminating information, false news can travel further, at speeds, volumes and distances that were impossible in the past.

False news can be both ideologically and commercially driven. It includes stories published to make people believe something untrue, or to generate clicks and potential revenue on a particular website. Such stories are deliberate lies, which means that the person or entity publishing them is aware that they are fabricated. Although such stories may contain some truth, they are inaccurate

and the facts can be grossly exaggerated or misrepresented versions of reality.⁶

In order to measure and gain insight on the engagement of readers and consumers of social media with false news articles republished by Albanian language media outlets on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine and debunks of these stories published by fact-checking organisations, BIRN Albania used Crowdtangle to measure their engagement on Facebook and video views. CrowdTangle is a public insights tool from Meta that helps publishers, journalists, researchers, fact-checkers and others follow, analyse, and report on what's happening across social media. CrowdTangle tracks interactions, which is defined as reactions, comments and shares. Interactions are also known as engagement.⁷

The researchers used the 'CrowdTangle Search' product to find and discover content across social media, by searching through the translated keywords of false news articles listed in the #UkraineFacts database to find republications in the Albanian language media. For the video views on YouTube, the researchers used the description made available for each video to identify false news. The data on engagement and video views was collected during the research period, August to October 2022, and are subject to slight changes if reviewed, because posts, photos and videos on social media usually register new interactions over time. However, the vast majority of engagement is recorded on social media posts in the first 48 hours after publication, unless a post is shared again by a popular page or an account with high interaction with followers later on.

⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation, "What is Fake News? And how to spot it", (2019), Url: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/38906931>, Accessed on 27.10.2022.

⁷ Crowdtangle, "Understanding and Citing CrowdTangle Data", (2022), Url: <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/4558716-understanding-and-citing-crowdtangle-data>, Accessed on 6.11.2022.

III. Findings

Through the data collected the researchers were able to map the spread of false stories that have circulated in the Albanian language media on Russia's aggression of Ukraine in the first eight months of 2022. Researchers concluded that in contrast to prevailing perception, Albanian language media is not immune to Russian disinformation and the publication of false stories on the invasion of Ukraine. The number of false stories circulating in the Albanian media on Russia's invasion of Ukraine is comparable to other countries in the region - Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have been highlighted previously as targets of Russian disinformation campaigns. The false news circulating in Albanian language media on Russia's invasion of Ukraine has both pro-Russian and Pro-Ukrainian messaging. The researchers were also able to identify stories that debunk false news or decontextualized photos and videos published by media and fact-checking services on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, the interaction rate of false stories in social media is much higher than the interaction rate of stories that debunk them.

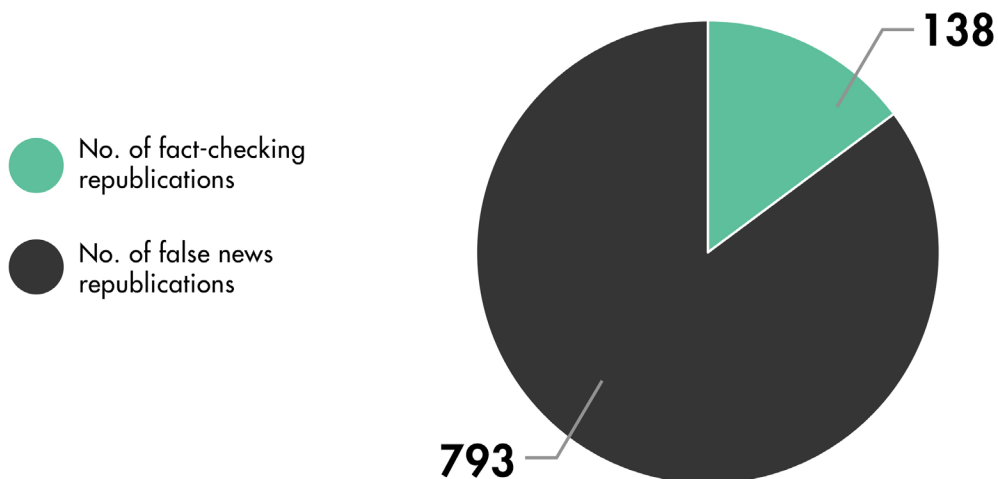
3.1 Proliferation of Disinformation in Albanian Language Media

The research was able to identify 41 false news articles, decontextualized videos or photos published in the local media or social media in the period from February to August 2022. These false news articles registered in total 793 republications in local media outlets or social media pages. Most of the disinformation cases registered multiple republications in local media in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia - up to 59 times for a single story.

BIRN Albania was able to identify 35 debunks of false news articles published by local media or fact-checking organisations in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, with a total of 138 republications.

Graphic 1:

NUMBER OF REPUBLICATIONS REGISTERED IN ALBANIAN LANGUAGE MEDIA



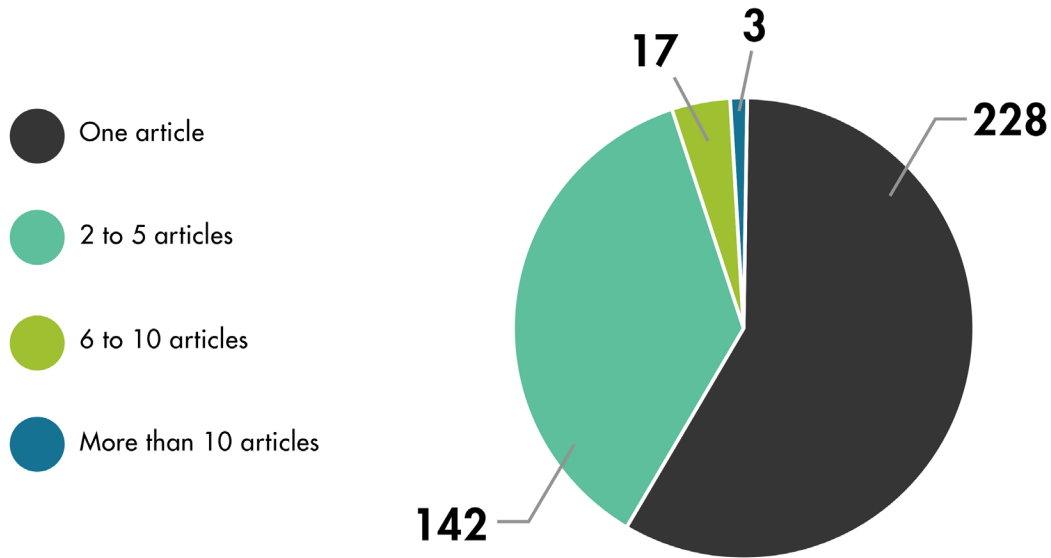
False news articles have been republished in total by 390 media outlets, on their websites or social media channels. More than half of these (52.3 per cent) circulated in media outlets headquartered in Albania, 36.9 per cent in media outlets based in Kosovo and 10.8 per cent in North Macedonia.

Most of the 390 Albanian-language media outlets (58.5 per cent) have published just one false news article from the list of false news articles monitored, while 36.4 per cent have published

between two to five false news articles and 4.4 per cent published between six to ten false news articles during the first eight months of 2022. Only three media outlets have republished more false news articles, with 12, 13 and 15 articles respectively.

Graphic 2:

NUMBER OF MEDIA OUTLETS THAT HAVE PUBLISHED FALSE NEWS ARTICLES

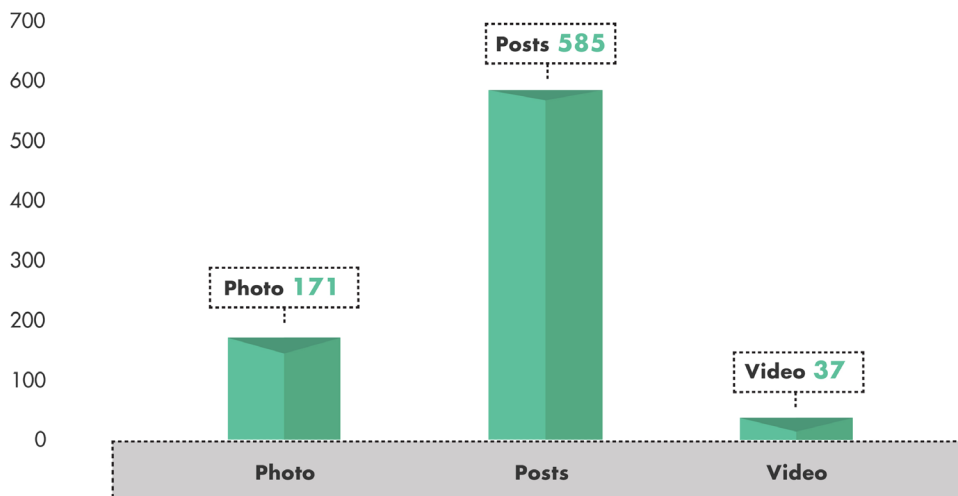


The data clearly suggests that online digital native media, often known locally as news portals, are more susceptible to the publication of false news on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine than any

other types of media. Hundreds have been established in recent years in Albania. From the 793 republications of the 41 false news articles on the Russian invasion in Ukraine identified in the Albanian language media outlets for the period January to August 2022, 72.6 per cent were published online by digital native news media outlets, 10.5 per cent by television stations and the rest from public Facebook Pages or YouTube channels, newspapers, radio and magazine websites.

Out of 793 data points of false news on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 73.8 per cent were republished as news stories with photos and videos in different types of media, 3.8 per cent of items were videos published in various social media channels, and 17.6 per cent of items were republished as photos on Facebook.

NUMBER OF FALSE NEWS REPUBLICATIONS BY FORMAT



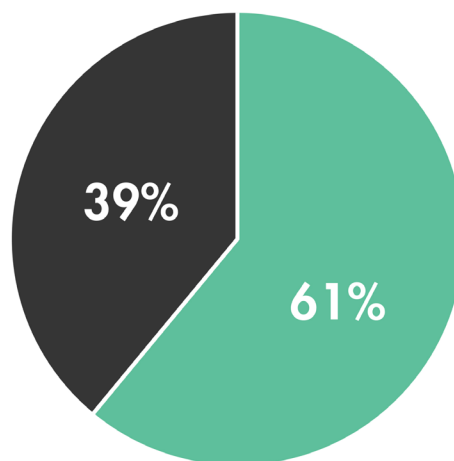
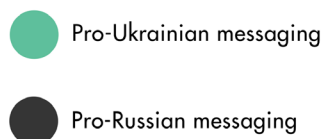
Graphic 3:

3.2 Main Trends

According to data collected from the #UkraineFacts database, the majority of the disinformation cases that were republished in Albanian language media on the Russian invasion of Ukraine originated, or were first published, on social media channels. More than 85 per cent of the false news stories identified through this monitoring, especially those based on fabricated or decontextualized photos and videos, originated from social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Other sources included tabloid media outlets like the Daily Mail, New York Post, Fox News, the Daily Mirror or Russian-state owned media outlets like Sputnik. Usually these false news articles were translated by one local media and then republished by many others.

SHARE OF PRO-UKRAINIAN AND PRO-RUSSIAN MESSAGING IN THE FALSE NEWS

Graphic 4:



The majority (61 per cent) of the false news republications that circulated in the Albanian language media and social media channels on the invasion of Ukraine carried a pro-Ukrainian messaging and 39 per cent carried pro-Russian messaging.

Data collected and analysed from the Facebook-owned application Crowdtangle shows that false news republications in Albanian with pro-Ukrainian messaging had a higher interaction/engagement rate on social media compared with those with pro-Russian messaging.

In total the false news republications with pro-Ukrainian messaging registered 182,731 interactions and 913,437 video views on Facebook, as well as 96,461 video views on YouTube, while the stories with pro-Russian messaging registered only 7,653 interactions and 192,725 video views on Facebook. This data suggests that the Albanian public is much more responsive to pro-Ukrainian messages related to the conflict.

CASE STUDY: Decontextualized Videos and Photos with Pro-Ukrainian Messaging

On February 25, on Facebook and Twitter, a video was published of a man in camouflage and black balaclava bidding farewell to a woman. The video was accompanied by the post: "Ukraine soldiers leaving their wives for war like this. Please come back soon. 🇺🇦 #Ukraine #Russia #Ucrania."⁸ One day later an image from this video was used in a segment of the Albanian TV show 'Shqiperia Live' (Albania Live) on Top Channel TV about emotional pictures of Ukrainian soldiers going to war.⁹ The

⁸ Twitter, @techz_dave, February 25, 2022, 1.06 a.m., Ukraine soldiers leaving their wives for war, Url: https://twitter.com/techz_dave/status/1496999930828713989, Accessed on 11.01.2022.

⁹ Top Channel TV, Shqiperia Live (Albania Live), February 25, 2022, Url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1HbpfDZtU>, Accessed on 11.01.2022.

journalist in the studio commented on the photo, underlining that soldiers are bidding farewell to their families as they leave for the frontline. Research from various fact-checking organisations has revealed that the video is not real but scripted and part of a movie named “The War of Chimeras”. Television audience data is not available but on YouTube the segment received 15,004 views as of November 2, 2022. The video of the Ukrainian soldier bidding farewell to his wife has been debunked as hoax by two digital native Albanian language media in Albania and North Macedonia, respectively Lapsi.al and Portalb.mk, as well as the Tirana based fact-checking organisation Faktoje.al. Although data on the readership of debunked false news stories is not available, they registered only a couple of interactions on social media.



The show contained two other widely circulated but decontextualized photos. One photo portrays the mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko, with a machine gun and military fatigues and the other photo is a couple draped with the Russian and Ukrainian flags, emphasising the civilians’ desire for peace. These two photos have also been taken out of context and are not directly related with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The image of Klitschko was taken in 2021, when he participated in a territorial military drill with reservists.¹⁰ The photo of the couple draped in a Russian and Ukrainian flag is also old. It was

¹⁰ Logically, “The mayor of Kyiv Vitali Klitschko has been pictured in a military uniform with a machine gun while he fights for Ukraine”, (2022), Url; <https://www.logically.ai/factchecks/library/489838e5>, Accessed on 11.02.2022.

published for the first time in 2019 in a Washington Post article by Isabelle Khurshudyan.¹¹

Apart from the segment of the 'Shqipëria Live' TV show, which aired on the national broadcaster Top Channel TV on February 26, 2022, Klitchko's decontextualized photo was republished by at least 16 other Albanian language media outlets. The out-of-date photo of the couple draped in Russian and Ukrainian flags, also registered 16 republications in various types of media/social media in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania. The photo circulated mainly in Kosovo and was debunked by the fact-checking organisation Kallxo.com. According to Crowdtangle data, the false news article with the old photo of the couple draped in flags registered a total of 11,212 interactions on Facebook. Meanwhile, the debunked story registered a total of 70 interactions, or less than one percent of the interactions of the false news items. This data suggests that despite the best efforts made by fact-checking organisations to debunk hoaxes, false news articles have the potential to travel further and faster in the online media environment.

3.3 Key Narratives

Although the conflict in Ukraine is still unfolding, previous research and monitoring of the trends of disinformation based on fact-checking stories published by networks such as #UkraineFacts has identified a number of narratives used to spread pro-Ukraine and pro-Russian messages.¹² These narratives were recurrent in false news and decontextualized photos and videos also republished in the Albanian language media and include the following main categories:

¹¹ Washington Post, "She wore the Russian flag. He had Ukraine's. Some people loved the photo and others were aghast.", (2019), [Url:https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/she-wore-the-russian-flag-he-had-ukraines-some-people-loved-the-photo-and-others-were-aghast/2019/12/04/a5f32ba0-15df-11ea-80d6-d0ca7007273f_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/she-wore-the-russian-flag-he-had-ukraines-some-people-loved-the-photo-and-others-were-aghast/2019/12/04/a5f32ba0-15df-11ea-80d6-d0ca7007273f_story.html), Accessed on 11.01.2022.

¹² Disinfo.eu, "Ukraine conflict disinformation: worldwide narratives and trends" (2022), [Url: https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/ukraine-conflict-disinformation-worldwide-narratives-and-trends/](https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/ukraine-conflict-disinformation-worldwide-narratives-and-trends/), Accessed on 11.05.2022.

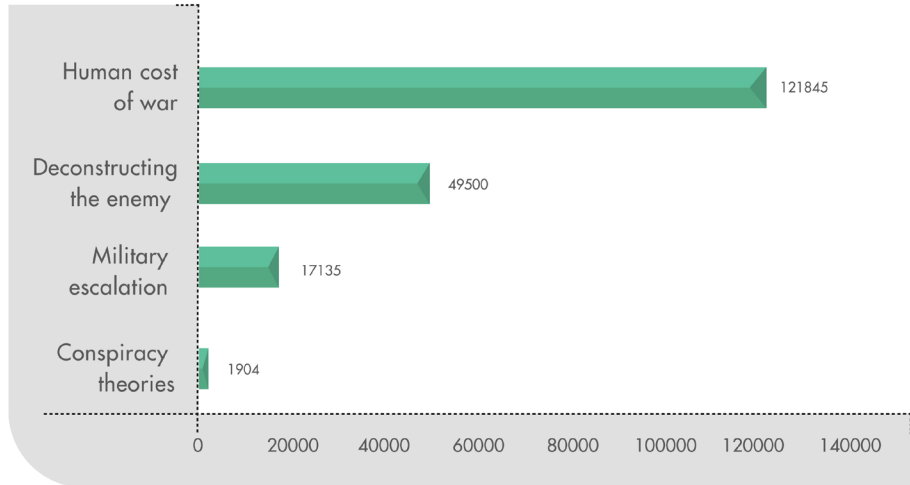
- Military escalation
- Dehumanising the enemy/valorising your soldiers
- Conspiracy theories
- The human cost of war

The largest category in terms of number of false news republications registered was “The human cost of war” (29 per cent) tied with “military escalation” (29 per cent), followed by “Dehumanising the enemy/valorising your soldiers” (25 per cent) and “conspiracy theories” (17 per cent).

“The human cost of war” also had the largest number of recorded interactions of false news on Facebook, equal to 64 per cent of the total, followed by “Dehumanising the enemy/valorising your soldiers” (26 per cent) and “military escalation” (9 per cent). The positive news from this data is that the narrative related to “conspiracy theories” registered just one per cent of total interactions.

NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS PER FAKE NEWS NARRATIVE

Graphic 5:



The “military escalation” narrative involved stories reporting erroneous details of military operations and the international reaction to the invasion and decontextualized photos and videos. The “human cost of war” narrative included mainly decontextualized photos and videos of Ukrainian soldiers bidding farewell to their family members as they left for the frontline but also photos of refugees and celebrities in military fatigues. The “dehumanising the enemy/valorising your soldiers” narrative contained propaganda aimed to valorize the heroism of Ukrainian defenders, like the fabricated story on the Ghost of Kyiv,¹³ or claims in favour or against Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The Ghost of Kyiv is the nickname given to a mythical MiG-29 flying ace credited with shooting down six Russian planes over Kyiv during the Kyiv offensive in February 2022. While the conspiracy theory narrative included false news on the alleged US funded biological weapons labs in Ukraine and a sub-narrative or denials for a Russian attack against civilians in the city of Mariupol.

For example, on March 9, 2022 Russian warplanes bombed a hospital in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, killing three people and injuring 17 others, including two pregnant women. The photos of the injured women were shared by the media across the world. False social media posts, some of which were republished by Albanian language media outlets, claimed that one of the injured pregnant women was an actor.

CASE STUDY: Conspiracy Theories with pro-Russian Messaging

False accusations and misleading information are elements that were used to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, starting from Vladimir Putin’s declaration of war of February 21, 2022, which

¹³ Balkanweb.com, “Kush është “fantazma e Kievit”? Historia e pilotit ukrainas bëhet virale, rrëzon gjashtë aeroplanë rusë,” (2022), Url: <https://www.balkanweb.com/kush-eshte-fantazma-e-kievit-historia-e-pilotit-ukrainas-behet-virale-rrazon-gjashte-aeroplan-ruse/>, Accessed on 11.01.2022.

contained many dubious historical claims.¹⁴

Six out of seven false news stories which were identified by the researchers under the conspiracy theory narrative had pro-Russian messaging and half of them were related to the false theme of the alleged presence of US-funded biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine, which aimed to justify the Russian invasion launched by Putin in February, by painting Kyiv as a threat to the Russian Federation. The researchers were able to identify three false news articles with the same theme, which circulated in the Albanian language media. The most popular was a false news article that alleged that Hunter Biden, the son of the US President Joe Biden, had set up a series of biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. The allegation is based on a statement made on March 24, 2022, in a briefing by Igor Kirilov, the commander of the Russian Army's Atomic, Biological and Chemical Defense Forces, and a story published on March 25, 2022 by the British tabloid Daily Mail¹⁵, which claims that Hunter Biden helped secure millions in funding for a US contractor in Ukraine specialising in deadly pathogen research. Another story, published by Russian media First Channel, claimed that American company "Metabiota" had appeared in Ukraine with the help of Hunter Biden. Variants of this story have been detected by fact-checkers on media and social media in Georgia and Estonia.

This research shows that the fabricated allegations on the alleged biological weapons programme have circulated widely in Albanian language media in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. In total the researchers were able to identify 30 republications of this narrative in local media outlets. The story was mainly published by digital native media outlets, which registered 24 republications.

¹⁴ WashingtonPost, "Fact-checking Putin's speech on Ukraine", (2022), URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/23/fact-checking-putins-speech-ukraine/>, Accessed on 19.12.2022

¹⁵ Daily Mail, "EXCLUSIVE: Hunter Biden DID help secure millions in funding for US contractor in Ukraine specializing in deadly pathogen research, laptop emails reveal, raising more questions about the disgraced son of then vice president," (2022), Url: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10652127/Hunter-Biden-helped-secure-millions-funding-military-biotech-research-program-Ukraine.html>, Accessed on 05.11.2022

Dalin emailt/Djali i presidentit Biden drejton laboratorët e armëve biologjike në Ukrainë

26/03/2022, 23:24



The story has been carried also by the websites of three television stations, two newspapers and one magazine. The vast majority of the republications of false news has circulated in Albania (80 per cent), where the false news has been republished 24 times.

Data from Crowdtangle show that the story has registered a total 927 interactions on Facebook. The narrative with pro-Russian messaging on alleged US biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine has been pushed through two other stories. One is based on an image, which allegedly shows secret NATO biological weapons labs under the Azovstal metallurgical plant

in Mariupol. The plant was the scene of fierce fighting between Russian forces and the Ukrainian Azov battalion and became emblematic of the siege of the city in March 2022. The other false news article claims that the US Defense Department has allegedly admitted the existence of 46 biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. The claim originated from an Instagram post and was recycled by Russian state sponsored media. This false news article has been debunked by a fact-checking organisation in North Macedonia (Vertetmates.mk), a fact which was picked up by several digital native media outlets. Crowdtangle data show that the articles reporting that the original article was false registered a total of 95 interactions on Facebook, or roughly one tenth of the interactions registered by the false news story.

3.4 Fake vs. Real: The Struggle to Counter Disinformation Narratives

By mapping the proliferation in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia of pro-Russian and Ukrainian messaging through the spread of false news, decontextualized photos and videos, the researchers were able to identify a total of 41 false news articles and 38 debunks of false news stories. However,

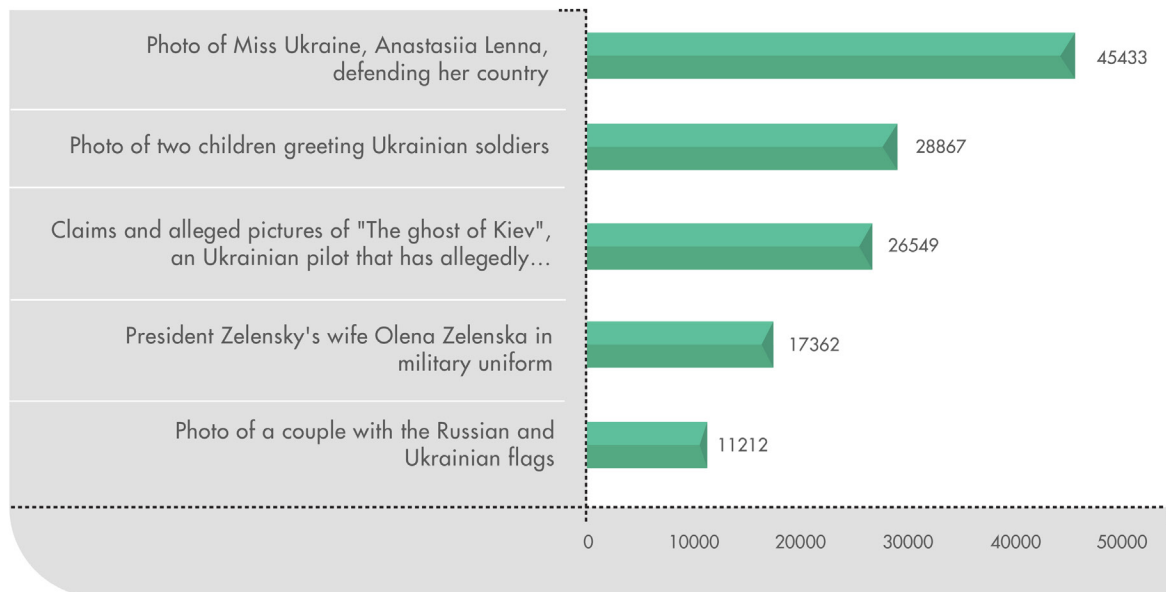
the data do not help understand the audience. Although there is a lack of audience data for online media in Albania, the engagement with social media posts is a good indicator.

Data obtained from Crowdtangle shows that the 41 false news articles and their republications identified on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine were circulated through 788 social media posts, registering a total 190,384 interactions on Facebook, with an average of 241 interactions per post. While the 38 stories that were debunked and their republications, circulated in 160 posts in social media and registered a total 7,906 interactions, with an average of 49 interactions per post. The average interaction rate per post between a false news article or decontextualized photo/video, compared to the debunks of the same material, suggests that disinformation travels further and creates more engagement on Facebook.

Data collected through Crowdtangle on false news republications that registered the most interactions, suggests that decontextualized photos were the most effective format of disinformation that proliferated in media/social media in Albania on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the list of the ten most interactive posts with false news narratives, seven are photos posted on Facebook and three are links to online media stories distributed through social media. Of the ten most popular social media posts, three were on public Facebook pages (one the official Facebook page of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama), three by the Facebook pages of television stations, three by digital native media and one from the Facebook page of a newspaper. All ten of the most popular social media posts include pro-Ukrainian messaging.

Graphic 6:

NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS FOR MAIN FALSE NEWS ARTICLES



CASE STUDY: Albanian PM distributes decontextualized war photos

The spread of disinformation can be both deliberate or the result of error and mistake. One route for disinformation to become viral is through circular reporting, when one source publishes misinformation that is picked up and republished by another news outlet or social media page, which cites the original source claiming that the information is accurate. When other news sources republish the story the cycle is perpetuated.¹⁶

Two of the five most popular posts with the most interaction that were distributed on the Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Albanian language media/social media during the period January to August 2022, came from the Facebook page of the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, in the form of circular reporting. Both posts were decontextualized photos with pro-Ukrainian messaging. The two social media hoaxes posted by Edi Rama registered a total 53,301 interactions on Facebook, accounting for almost 28 per cent of total interactions of all the false news on the Russian invasion of Ukraine identified by BIRN through its research. The post with the most interactions from Rama is a photo of two children greeting Ukrainian soldiers. The photo was posted by the Albanian Prime Minister on February 27, 2022, three days after the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, accompanied by a Ukrainian flag and the emoji of a broken heart. According to data from Crowdtangle, this single post registered a total 27,589 interactions on Edi Rama's social media page. The problem with the photo shared by the Albanian leader is that it was not taken after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, but years earlier. The photo was snapped by the Ukrainian photographer Dmytro Muravsky in March 2016.

¹⁶ University of Victoria Libraries, 'Fake News', (2022), URL: <https://libguides.uvic.ca/fakenews/how-it-spreads>, Accessed on 19.12.2022.

The post with the second highest engagement was another decontextualized photo of Miss Ukraine, Anastasiia Lenna, wearing camouflage, with an automatic rifle, which suggested that she had joined the military to defend her country. Rama posted Lenna's photo on March 1, 2022, with the comment "Until yesterday she was just Miss Ukraine". This suggests that Lenna is now a soldier defending Ukraine from Russia's invasion. The photo of Lenna in military fatigues received a total of 25,712 interactions on Facebook. However, Lenna has since clarified that she has not joined the military and the photo was only meant to inspire people. Both photos are examples of disinformation/propaganda with pro-Ukrainian messaging, distributed through decontextualized images that fall under the narrative of "the human cost of war" and aim to elicit emotions among social media followers.

Rama has a far-reaching social media page with 1.61 million followers. According to Crowdtangle data the page had in the last 12 months a total 17.3 million interactions and 124.82 million video views, 55.5 per cent of which were on live posts. The video section on the Prime Minister's website is branded as Edi Rama's Television or ERTV and despite not being an official government account, is used as a key means of digital communication by the government's office. The content of the account, including videos, posts and live feeds is produced by the government's communication department. However, as this research has shown, such state-funded social media resource is not immune to spreading disinformation. The risk is far greater for individuals on social media who lack the resources and professional training to fact-check posts.

3.5 Engagement with false news

As in the case study, false news articles can spread because individuals and editorial structures do not take time to check their veracity. There are cases where false news is shared and reposted by individuals because they are bombarded with it or due to the fact that sometimes the disinformation is more interesting and elicits stronger emotions among readers.

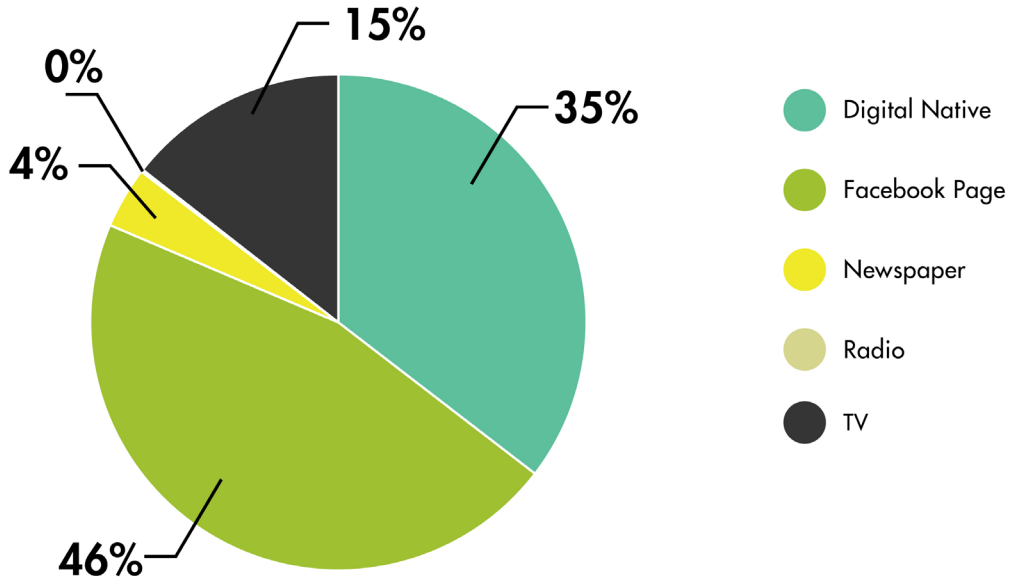
Through the data analysed with the help of pivot tables in Excel, the researchers in this study were able to identify not only the number of false news articles, decontextualized photos and videos in Albanian language media, but the sum of total engagement/interactions registered by such false news narratives in social media. Data from Crowdtangle shows that media based in Albania circulated 38 false news articles, which registered 125,778 interactions on Facebook. Albanian language media based in North Macedonia circulated 16 with a total reach of 7,062 engagements on Facebook, and media based in Kosovo registered 53,113 Facebook interactions for 22 false news articles. Albanian language social media posts of digital native medias based in other countries registered in total 4,431 engagements on Facebook.

Posts from digital native news Albanian media in the three countries published 73 per cent of the total articles identified, across social media these stories accounted for 38 per cent of the interactions. Although Facebook pages published 11 per cent of the false news stories, the sum of their engagement was 42 per cent of the total, followed by television with 14 per cent and social media channels of newspapers with 4 per cent of the total engagement.

According to Crowdtangle data, on average a false news post from a Facebook page - not social media channel of digital or legacy media - or decontextualized photo received 951 interactions, if it was posted on the social media channel of a digital native news media it registered 126 interactions, newspapers had on average 385 interactions and television stations 215. The data suggest that popular Facebook pages by public personalities can be in certain conditions more effective than even the social media channels of mainstream media in engaging their audience with fake news or decontextualized photos and videos.

Graphic 7:

SHARE OF TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS PER TYPE OF MEDIA



IV. Conclusions and recommendations

The data collected by the researchers suggests that online digital native media, often known locally as news portals, were more susceptible to the publication of false news on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These outlets often lack resources to establish effective editorial structures and revert to copy-pasting content from other media without verifying the veracity of such stories, photos or videos.

The proliferation of false news on Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Albanian language media has no clear ideological backdrop, but could be related to the inability of local media outlets to filter disinformation due to weak editorial structures.

Although Albania supports Ukraine's struggle against Russia's invasion, the proliferation of fake news in local media - even though the majority are with pro-Ukrainian messaging - is not a positive development, because it shows that there is a lack of resilience/capacities to filter out disinformation campaigns.

As the conflict in Ukraine is continuously evolving, so are disinformation campaigns, which also spread on a global scale. There is a need for journalists, media and fact-checkers to constantly monitor the veracity of information coming from the warzone and tackle the spread of disinformation. Although a specific country or media outlet might not be the target of disinformation, they can equally fall prey to false news as it is driven by commercial rather than ideological factors.

Because fake news has the power to travel further and faster, media outlets in Albania should sharpen their skills and build resilience by strengthening their editorial structures and fact checking capabilities.

As the data in this study suggests, social media users have higher interaction rates with false news and hoaxes and a low interaction rate with articles debunking these stories, highlighting the need to filter and stop the proliferation of false news and disinformation before publication and stop the vicious circle.

Although monitoring and debunking of false news by fact-checking organisations is important, it can neither replace nor match the need to strengthen editorial structures and fact-checking capabilities internally in media outlets, in order to stop the spread of disinformation.

FALSE NEWS ON
RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE
IN THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE MEDIA



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